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ABSTRACT

The subject of language learning of children in bilingual families is considered in this paper. The author discusses practical problems and provides examples from his own family situation in which his children learned French, English, and German. The possibility of language mixture is discussed and the author presents some tentative conclusions about the usage of a particular language in a particular situation. If the situation is a natural one, it is likely to motivate the child to use the language of the situation. If the parents do not interfere or force the child to speak a given language in a given situation, the overall linguistic development of the child is likely to be normal. If the parents inconspicuously lead the child into natural contexts in which the probability of language switch is high, the full language learning potential of the situation will have its effect upon the children. (VM)

LANGUAGE STRATEGIES OF THE BILINGUAL FAMILY

by

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INTRODUCTION

Every year there are thousands of bilingual marriages between persons speaking different languages. Although statistics are not usually kept of such marriages, there are indications that they may be on the increase. For example, Yugoslavia, one of the few countries which maintain such interlingual statistics, noted an increase of about 30% in such marriages within the decade 1950 - 1960.[1]

Unlike the unilingual, or common variety, multilingual marriages contain an additional dimension in the patterns of interpersonal relations which such unions involve; this is seen in the choice of medium of communication, not only by the couple, but also by their children and, in the case of the enlarged family, of relatives as well - in other words, in the choice of the working language or languages of the group.

To begin with, there is a choice of three different possibilities. Either everyone in the group uses the language of the husband, everyone uses the language of the wife, or both languages are used according to some

overt or implicit pattern. The implementation of the pattern may be unconscious or conscious, unintentional or intentional. If it is unconscious and unintentional - a policy of *laissez-faire*, as it were - the dominant language is likely to prevail in the end, and assure the unilingualism of the succeeding generations.

On the other hand, if the way the languages are used is based on a firm decision to maintain the different languages - a policy of planned repartition, the successful creation of bilingual families, and bilingual communities, will depend on the wisdom and feasibility of the policy.

A policy of planned repartition is composed of one or a number of language strategies. For purposes of analysis, these can be divided into two categories - strategies of dichotomy or fixed alternatives, and strategies of alternation involving the practice of spontaneous switching from one language to the other.

1. *DICHOTOMY*

Strategies of dichotomy can be divided into those of person, place, time, topic and activity. Let us

consider each of these in turn and see how they can be and have been applied in the practice of a number of bilingual families, including my own.

1.1. *Strategies of Person*

We are all familiar with the Grammont Formula: *une personne; une langue* (one person; one language), which began to appear in the literature on bilingualism at the turn of the century.[11] Grammont theorized that the separation of the two languages from infancy would help the child learn two languages without either additional effort or confusion. It is the formula used in most reported experiments on family bilingualism. One of the first such experiments was that of Ronjat which began in 1909. The Ronjats made it clear to their son Louis, born the previous year in Vienna, that if he wanted his spoon, he said *cuillère* to his father or *Löffel* to his German speaking mother or her relatives. Ronjat thought he could thus place both languages on an equal footing. His report of the first five years, however, shows that this is not exactly what happened in practice.[32]

During the first few months, German predominated, and after two years Louis used German words in French sentences. After the second speech year, however, French began to dominate, and by the fourth year, French words appeared in German sentences. Following this there were periodic switches in language dominance, apparently caused by changes in the environment.[32]

Although most of Ronjat's details are on the first three years, there are some data on the fourth and fifth years as well. A decade after the publication of his monograph, Ronjat wrote to Michael West who was about to embark on a study of school bilingualism in Bengal. Ronjat reported that his son had done well in the French primary and secondary schools which he attended, resulting in a dominant French academic and technical vocabulary but a preference for German in literature.[46] Ronjat summarizes his results as follows: 1. Continual use of two languages from infancy. 2. Parallel acquisition of two phonological systems. 3. Acquisition of two languages comparable in sequence of mastery and achievement to that of the average monolingual.

We had to wait almost another quarter century, however, before getting a comparable record of results of the application of the Grammont Formula. This one, however, was much more detailed and extensively informative. I refer, of course, to the four-volume study of Werner Leopold.[18] Born in London of German parentage, Leopold received most of his education in Germany, where his parents had settled when he was three years of age. In his twenties, he went abroad and after a period in Latin America, settled in the United States where he married a third-generation German American. After the birth of their first daughter Hildegard,in Milwaukee in 1930, Leopold decided to speak only German to her, while his wife limited herself to English. But more important, he also decided to keep a detailed record of the results, starting with the end of the second month of life, recording all utterances in phonetic notation.

The results show a striking similarity with those achieved by the Ronjats. Although the child achieved mastery of both languages, these were never equally strong. First tne mother's language prevailed and later on the father's. There were periodic shifts in

dominance as the language contexts changed, as for example, during a trip to Germany when the child spoke only German. Returning to the United States, she spoke more and more English, until that language became stabilized as her dominant one. Like Louis Ronjat's, Hildegard's learning process was not adversely affected by her childhood bilingualism. The achievement test she took on entering the fifth grade revealed her English vocabulary as being at about the seventh grade level.

My own personal childhood experience with a number of languages seems to confirm the findings of Ronjat and Leopold, as to the efficacy of the Grammont Formula. I should, however, add something on these elusive, emotive effects, which cannot easily be observed from the outside.

I shall first deal with the strategies of the family into which I was born and later with those of the family which I founded.

The strategies to which I was subjected in early childhood were as follows: three languages both inside and outside my home, one in the kindergarten and two in the neighborhood, functioning as two active and four

passive languages, making a total of six.

As for the person-language relationship, it was a bit more complex than those of the Ronjats and Leopolds.

I remember that I always associated German with my grandfather since he usually spoke German - although he knew several other languages. My father was bilingual (Hungarian - German) but we always spoke German together. Yet - there was great difference between the German I spoke to my grandfather and that I spoke to my father: with my grandfather I felt at ease when speaking German; but not quite so with my father; perhaps because my father and mother spoke Hungarian among themselves and *that* language seemed infinitely more endearing to me than German. However, as a child, I reconciled myself to the fact that Hungarian was *their* language and that *I* was expected to speak German. In a way I felt like an outsider and at times I was envious of my mother who seemed to be getting a greater share of my father's love. Up to the age of four nobody in the family knew that I understood Hungarian, and even after it became known, I continued to speak German to my father until my university years. Only then did my father and I speak Hungarian with

each other, and this brought us closer together giving me a feeling of warmth and tenderness which was always lacking in our German relationship. He then reserved German for times when he scolded me or when we discussed an academic subject.

My mother spoke only German to me, up to the age of nine when I changed from German schooling to Serbian; she then worked long hours with me to teach me Serbian. At the age of high school I alternated languages. I spoke mainly German to my mother except in all matters concerning school life, when I used Serbian. After high school I spoke to my mother almost exclusively in Serbian and she responded in either German or Serbian. As for my numerous uncles and aunts, they represented three language divisions: German, Hungarian and Serbian. Most of them were one to one relationships, but I remember a multilingual uncle to whom I was never quite sure in what language to speak. We always had to wait for a situation before warming up and deciding upon which language we would choose.

1.2. *Strategies of Place*

Another type of dichotomy is the strategy of allocating languages to places. This is a common practice, often imposed by necessity. It happens every year in the families of thousands of immigrants and migrant workers, which have always been present in American communities. Since World War II migrants have come to constitute one of the most important social phenomena in Northern Europe, with three million in France alone, and almost as many in Germany.

As a rule, a family moving to an area where another language is spoken will first continue to use its own language exclusively and gradually adopt the area language while maintaining the home language. The children develop a home language/community language dichotomy in their psycholinguistic associations. Quite often, however, the incursions of the community into the home, in the form of neighbors, visitors, school friends, and later, boy-friends, girl-friends and eventually in-laws, errode the status of the home language, especially after the children have abandoned it as a medium of communication between themselves - an area where the community language is bound to dominate.

Although the number of reports on the use of reparti-tion by place is limited, this type of language strategy has been consciously used as a policy for the creation and maintainance of family bilingualism. One of the first studies was that of Pavlovitch.[29] The Serbian-speaking Pavlovitch family settled in Paris after the First World War and decided to maintain Serbian as the home language, while using French as their external or community language. Their son Dušan, therefore, learned his French outside the home. Since the Pavlovitch record covers only the first two years, it is not sur-prising that Dušan seems to know much more Serbian than he does French. Nevertheless Pavlovitch comes to some of the same conclusions as does Ronjat.

More than a decade later we have another report, this time from Geneva. In the 1930s, Elemér and Adèle Kenyeres arrived in Geneva with daughter Eva just turn-ing seven. In Geneva they insisted on maintaining their native Hungarian as the home language, but sent their daughter to a local school where all the teaching was understandably done in French. The Kenyeres later published a study of what they observed.[16] After six months, French began to be used in some domains as the

child's dominant language. There was little language mixture, and no confusion. The new language was acquired faster than had been the mother tongue, but in a somewhat different way, since it involved a certain amount of conscious effort.

A more recently recorded case is that of the Penfield family. The English-speaking Penfields decided to make German the language of the nursery and they hired a German governess for their two younger children (aged 6 months and 18 months). To the best of their ability they themselves used German when they entered the nursery, so that the children heard only German when there. As the children turned three and four, respectively, another dichotomy of place was imposed, when they were placed in a French nursery school. At school age they began and continued their studies in English without any harmful effects. A similar program was laid out for the two older children starting with the ages of eight and nine.[30]

Penfield concludes that there were no effects of retardation or confusion of languages. The language switch according to place became a conditioned reflex

for the children entering the nursery or the school room. In retrospect Penfield believes that it would have been better to continue French until the age of seven, since the seven-year-old "hangs on" to things.

If a change of place can be instrumental in promoting the learning of another language, it can also be a factor in the forgetting of one. This is illustrated in a study made of the forgetting of her Spanish mother-tongue and the learning of French by a six-year-old refugee from Madrid during the Spanish Civil War. The girl was adopted by a Belgian family living in Brussels; within about three months she had forgotten her first language (Spanish) and replaced it by her second (French). Two years later she started learning Spanish again, but this time more formally.[39]

It seems that if children learn languages quickly they can just as quickly forget them. Reasons for forgetting may vary, but by and large, changes of place seem to be among the most common causes. Children of diplomatic personnel, foreign business and military representatives and the like are exposed to different languages over sufficiently long periods to master them.

In some cases, the children may be emotionally disturbed by having suddenly to abandon a language to which they had become accustomed. A friend of mine in the German diplomatic corps, has written that his ten-year old son suffered a near depression as a result of having to switch suddenly from a German medium to a French medium school. Although he finally mastered the language, he did not like it. Two years later, when his father was posted to Ireland and he had to switch to an English-medium school, he developed a liking for French and a distaste for English. At the age of 13, speaking the three languages with almost equal ease, he preferred French to both his native German and his fluent English.

At an earlier age, however, children, even without conditioning seem to associate the right place with the right language, with a stubborness which often confounds their parents. The German father of a seven-year old bilingual American whose mother is English-speaking, writes that his daughter refuses to speak a word of English when she lands in Germany for the summer vacation and just as consistently refuses to utter a word of German outside the family when she returns to the United States.

In my own case, the language-person dichotomy already described operated in a larger language-place repartition. Until the age of four I was exposed, as I have already mentioned, to the same three languages inside and outside the home, namely to German, Hungarian and Serbian. At the age of four and a half I was placed in a French kindergarten; and by the age of five, three more languages had been added to my repertoire, namely, French, Russian and Rumanian. Yet, before the age of four my only active language had been German. Hungarian was my secret language, that is, I had a complete comprehension of it, but never admitted it. Serbian too was a passive language which I understood fairly well, but did not speak until the age of nine. French was my kindergarten language and Russian became my post-kindergarten language, as a result of my association with the family of my kindergarten teacher who was a native Russian, and Rumanian was spoken by a great number of my father's patients, whom I heard chatting in the waiting room. Of these additional three languages only French was active, while Russian remained latent until a later age; as for Rumanian, it never became active and I never had a desire to speak it.

1.3. *Time, Topic and Activity*

Times, topics and activities have also been allocated to the use of languages of a bilingual family, but with varying degrees of success.

In studying the strategies of time, a distinction has to be made between the sequences in which the different languages appear on the scene (staging), and the repartition of language uses among recurring time units.

The staging of languages in the life of the child may constitute the main strategy of the bilingual family. When parents want to make doubly sure that one of the family languages is well grounded, they may arrange for it to become the child's first language and maintain it to the point of fluency before the other language is brought in. This has been the practice of some educated immigrant families living in an area where the family language is not used. Some specialists of the psychology of language learning have suggested that it may be preferable to present both languages concurrently.[43]

It is true that time divisions are the practice in certain bilingual schools, where the working languages

may change regularly from morning to afternoon, from week to week, or month to month. In a federal military college in Quebec, for example, French and English have been used as working languages on alternate days. This approach has also been studied experimentally in schools in the Philippines.[40]

In the bilingual family, however, such formalization into time units is difficult in practice. I have observed a number of families who have tried it, and should like to explain what happened. In one family, where the mother was French, the father English, and the common language as well as that of the school, French, the schedule for the two children aged seven and nine was the following: on weekdays the whole family would speak the language of the school (French), whereas over the weekend the family would switch to the father's language (English). The result of this strategy was that the weekend language inevitably got overshadowed by the workday language - possibly because of the artificial set-up of the situation, the habit forming force of the five workdays, and also perhaps because of the domineering personality of the mother who spoke the workday language.

Another family, where the mother was German, the father French, the common language, as well as the school language, French, operated on a daily alternation schedule, the result of which was the same as above, namely, that German was soon overshadowed by French, due again perhaps to the artificiality of the situation and the fact that the mother herself was not categorical enough to insist on the usage of German.

Why do time dichotomies seem to be unworkable as a strategy in so many bilingual families? It is perhaps because, unlike persons and places, the switch to another language must be inner directed, as it were. In the case of time units, we do not have the same sort of conditioned reflex whose unconscious associations impose the appropriate language on the speaker. With time units, the speaker, with his eye on the clock, must make a conscious decision. Most families do not organize their time in such a way as to permit the use of time boundaries.

Another strategy of language repartition is by topic, whereby certain things must always be discussed in one language and other things in the other language. Sometimes, a family will use one of its languages only

for giving orders, making formal pronouncements, or reproaches. As a matter of fact, I remember that it was when such topics came up - unpleasant topics involving reprimands - that my father would switch to German. Other families reserve one of their languages for such activities as praying, or learning, or singing, or telephoning, or for taking part in games and sports.

It is not very often, however, that activities or topics are chosen *a priori* as a basis of language strategies. The switching practice is more often conditioned by other factors such as the fact that a topic or activity has been associated with groups outside the home.

Of all these strategies of dichotomy it would seem that those of person are the most lasting and effective. And there is some experimental evidence - albeit with adults - that would seem to support the effectiveness of associating languages with persons.[12]

2. *ALTERNATION*

In opposition to the division of language use within the bilingual family along the lines of person, place, time, topic and activity is the alternative use of both

languages. This may be either conditioned or free.

Conditioned alternation results from the necessity of switching to the other language as a result of some compelling motive. It may have to do with the occupation of the husband, whereby his work and even his training was in the other language. So that he will continually be tempted to switch back and forth to this language when talking about his work. Or it may be emotional stress that would lead a grandmother to switch back and forth between her stronger and weaker language as the flow of thought rushes more and more quickly through her mind. Or it may be a heavily associated word or a homophone that would trigger a switch to the other language.[2]

Whatever the motive, the result for the bilingual child is that both his parents may use both languages indifferently when speaking to him. And the child may also use both languages indifferently when speaking to bilingual parents or relatives. It is sometimes claimed that unplanned switching may confuse the child and lead to language mixture and emotional disturbance.[8] It has even been suggested that exposure to two languages

simultaneously may lead to mental blockage and stuttering.[36]

There is surely not enough experimental evidence or a sufficient accumulation of case studies to come to any hard and fast rule, since the conclusions drawn from the few cases studied may well be the result of *post hoc ergo propter hoc* reasoning. Anyone who has observed the language behavior of bilingual families and the language and emotional behavior of bilingual children must conclude that at least in some cases free alternation of languages does not lead to disaster.

3. *THE USE OF MULTIPLE STRATEGIES*

With all these possible strategies in mind, our own family had some difficult decisions to make when the time came to decide what languages we wanted our children to know. It may be of some interest if I were to recount how we used these strategies and what results we obtained.

Although it may seem ungracious to use my own family as an example, it is what I know best and at first hand. We started by reasoning that, living on a

continent which is overwhelmingly dominated by English, the maintenance of this language would give no trouble. English, therefore, was given the lowest maintenance priority in our staging strategy. Secondly, living in a medium-sized city which is 98% French-speaking, there should be no lack of opportunity to maintain the use of the French language - especially if it were made the school and the neighborhood language. The third language, however, posed a problem. It first had to be chosen from such possible candidates as Russian, Serbian, Hungarian, Italian, and German. But its choice would depend on the strategy to be used for its maintenance. If it were a strategy of place, the choice was more limited than if it were to be a strategy of person, for the simple reason that one person might be sufficient, but in a place strategy several persons would be involved. Opting for the latter and taking into account the likelihood of eventual use, we elected German as the home language. And because of the great difficulty of maintaining the language outside the home in a completely non-German area, it was given top priority in time, place and person. The strategy was to make German the first and only language learned from infancy. At the age of four the inevitable home-street dichotomy

would bring in another language, in this case French. This dichotomy was enlarged to include everything outside the home, once the children began attending French-language schools. Finally, the third language was introduced about the age of nine by using a person strategy, bringing in a father-mother dichotomy, thus introducing English into the home.

Under the headings of person, place and time, lèt me now take this opportunity to comment on how these different strategies worked in practice. At the beginning when German was the only language spoken in the family, there was no problem. It is only when we had decided that the time had come for the father to use his own language, namely English, to serve as a model and a stimulus that we ran into difficulties. Both children categorically refused to speak English to their father, with the logical objection "Why should we speak English to him, when he understands German?"

Seeing that there was no motivation and that the situation was ridiculously artificial, there was no hope for them to ever learn their father's language from their father. This problem was later solved by

interlarding a new place dichotomy in the learning sequence. But let me first explain our earliest strategy of place.

Changes of place were significant enough to cause a noticeable difference in the children's command of German. Around the age of two, when she began to speak, to the age of five, the elder spent three consecutive summers in Northern Germany, by the Baltic. She has never returned; but at the age of fourteen, she still speaks German essentially with the accent of that area. The younger, who spent two summers in the area, one as an infant and the other at the age of three, did not preserve the accent of the area, and developed and preserved a pronunciation of German which is closer to that of her parents, but with slight overtones of French influence in rhythm and intonation. (e.g. *Ich 'hab das 'nicht ge'sagt.*) She became less attached to German than did her sister for whom it had strong emotional ties.

Other changes in place, resulted in the strengthening of their English. These began with a term in Santa Monica, California in which the children spent

most of the time absorbing the blandishments of ten television chanels to a point where they would recite most of the oft-repeated commercials - including the singing ones. Being newcomers in a rather closed residential community and having not sufficient occasions to make friends, most of their English came from the air waves - and it turned out to be considerable. It stood them in good stead when four years later they spent a term in Florida and were able to continue their schooling in English with children their own age. Here they spoke only English to their friends, German to their family, and French among themselves, thus maintaining the three languages.

The term immediately preceding had been spent in Germany where they were also able to follow classes with companions of their own age. This was a school in which half the subjects were taught in English, thus serving as a preparation for the switch to the all-English medium in the United States.

As for the staging of the languages, German was used exclusively until kindergarten, when the children were exposed to French in preparation for their

schooling, which the elder began at the age of four and a half - in retrospect I think, unwisely - and the younger, at the normal age of six. The younger spent two years in a French kindergarten and always felt much more part of the milieu and more at home with her friends.

The resulting language distribution pattern in their verbal behavior, as they entered their teens is as follows: 1. German both ways to mother and grandmother. 2. French exclusively among themselves and outside the home. 3. English outside the borders of Quebec and increasingly as their father language. In pre-school years as already noted, they used only German with their father, since that was the language of the home. In early school years (5-7) they interlarded their German with stretches of French only when speaking to their father, and in later school years (8-14), especially after having spent a term in an all-English school, they used more and more English with him. The strategy was to convert the father language to English, preserve German as the mother-tongue, and French as the children's own language.

As in all reported cases from bilingual families, it was not surprising to find that one language was interfering with the other two. But because of the continual social control and feed-back, they were ephemeral by nature, and never led to language mixture. In other words they had no effect on the codes, remaining as they did as accidents of discourse. Interference began to appear about the time the children began attending French schools. It was first noticed in the interlarding of French school vocabulary, which soon became more available than the German counterpart. (e.g. *Ich weiss das schon par coeur.*) Then came the use of some French words in German, with added German morphology (e.g. *inventiert, exagériert, maîtrisieren*). Many amusing examples could be given if space permitted. At all events they were easily corrected and seldom appeared in their speech to unilinguals in German or English, for the simple reason that the unilinguals would not understand. The greatest force in eliminating interference was that of conformity with the speecn of their playmates.

How the children arrived at a systematization of their three languages is still something of a mystery,

although a few theorists of the subject have suggested tantalizing explanations.[15] An even more difficult problem is to explain the processes of cognition; few explanations of the cognitive basis of language learning take the bilingual child into account.[23]

CONCLUSION

From the above study of the language strategies used by us and other bilingual families to transmit our languages to our children, we might hazard the following very tentative conclusions:

1. If the situation is a natural one, it is likely to motivate the child to use the language of the situation.

2. If the parents do not interfere or force the child to speak a given language in a given situation, the overall linguistic development of the child is likely to be normal.

3. If the parents inconspicuously lead the child into natural contexts in which the probability of language switch is high, the full language learning potential of the situation will have its effect upon the children. It would seem unwise, except in later life,

to let the child know that he is involved in a process of bilingualization.

In retrospect, I think that one can safely assume that the study of family bilingualization can also contribute to the psychology of language learning. Observation of the degrees of success or failure of different language strategies of bilingual families throw light upon the question of how man acquires the ability to speak. Is the learning of speech the building up of a skill step by step, as one would learn to play the piano, for example? Or is it like the blossoming of a plant which, in its own time and under the right conditions,brings forth the flower and the fruit? There seems to be growing evidence that the latter is the case, since man seems to be the only being with an inborn capacity to speak. The success of bilingual families argues that this general capacity can take a great variety of specific forms, and that, if there is an imprinted capacity to speak, it is not limited to one language. Everything that the infant needs in order to master any human language, or a number of them, seems to be already imbedded in his nervous system. This must include a capacity to generate an infinite

number of different utterances from a finite - indeed a small number of units and patterns. It is also worth noting that the growth of language in the child goes hand in hand with the growth of its physical and mental skills. Like the plant, the child develops as a whole. And just as the growth of a plant can be guided in one or several directions, so can the innate abilities of the child be developed in a climate favorable to the learning of different skills including the mastery of more than one language. If the strategy is the right one, and it is applied with concern for the feelings and interests of the child, it could enable the bilingual family to produce bilingual children.

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